

## NEW PUBLICATIONS.

HANDEL.

**THE LIFE OF GEORGE FREDERICK HANDEL.** By W. S. ROCKSTRO. With an Introductory Notice by George Grove, D. C. L. 12mo. pp. xv. 452. Macmillan & Co.

It is not to the credit of English scholarship that no adequate biography of one of the greatest musicians and one of the favorite idols of the English people has yet been undertaken in the only country where such a work can be thoroughly executed. It is in England that the study of Handel's music has been most enthusiastically and successfully pursued. It is there that he is best understood. Most of his manuscripts are preserved there; and his life cannot be written without constant recourse to English collections. No Englishman, however, has yet attempted to do for Handel what Mr. Thayer has done for Beethoven, Jahn for Mozart, Spitta for Bach. German Chrysander's life of Handel, which has been suspended in mid-career for eighteen years, is one of those cumbersome masses of undigested learning, entirely without literary form, with which it is the unfortunate habit of too many German investigators to exhaust both their subject and their readers. The principal English life of Handel heretofore has been the production of a Frenchman, M. Victor Schleicher, published in 1857. It is a work of careful original research, which added a great deal to our knowledge of Handel and also of the condition of music in England in the first half of the eighteenth century; but it is not by any means an entertaining book; it is weak in criticism; and it is inaccurate in detail. Mr. Rockstro, who is one of the most useful and industrious contributors to Grove's "Dictionary of Music," has aimed at nothing higher than a brief, readable and correct popular life, less diffuse than Schleicher's but also somewhat less minute. His style is not elegant, but it is sufficiently animated and natural; his criticisms are not elaborate; he retells the standard anecdotes well enough; and he gives some account of all Handel's important works. His principal merit is in the correction of the errors of his predecessor—a task in which he has diligently followed the investigations of Chrysander and others, and has made an acute and careful personal examination of the Handel manuscripts. Upon the whole we must compliment him for doing well what he attempted. But a complete book on Handel, including a study and analysis of his works—that is to say, a musician's life—has yet to be written.

There are two points upon which even a biography like this is not ought to speak with more precision and authority than Mr. Rockstro has thought necessary. The first is the composition of Handel's orchestra. The condition of the existing scores has left this matter curiously uncertain, and it is evident that the old dispute about additional accompaniments cannot be intelligently continued while we do not even know what effects Handel used to produce. Mr. Rockstro declares himself opposed to all changes whatever, condemning them indeed with dogmatic vehemence; but he has failed to make it clear what the original accompaniments were which he wishes to see restored. It is well known that Handel made great use of the organ in filling up the thin scores of his oratorios and cantatas; but he did more than that, and there is not much doubt that his band was considerably fuller than the old score might lead one to suppose. The organization of an orchestra one hundred and fifty years ago was nevertheless so different from that which modern taste demands, the prevailing tone-color and the balance of parts were so different, that to play the "Messiah" as Handel used to play it would now be impracticable. Handel would not do it himself if he were here. The sticklers for archaic purity forget that the difference between the old orchestra and the new results not merely from a change of taste, but from a positive technical improvement. The characteristics of instruments have been modified, their capabilities have been increased, new combinations have been studied, the band has become richer, nobler, more supple, more expressive. Tones which were once admired are now found crude and disagreeable, simply because musicians have learned a better way of producing a parallel effect. Nobody who has studied the extraordinary development of the powers of the orchestra during the present century, and the consequent changes in the manner of writing for it, can doubt, sooner or later, the older masters will all have to be "translated," as Robert Franz translated Sebastian Bach.

The other matter in which Mr. Rockstro has disappointed us is the important question of Handel's plagiarisms. He refers, indeed, to the two most notorious charges of this nature—the alleged pilfering of parts of "Israel in Egypt" from a work by Uriel—and he indignantly repels the idea that Handel borrowed in either case; but his defense contains more rhetoric than reason. The accusation with respect to "Israel" rests upon very firm foundation. Among the Handel MSS. at Buckingham Palace is a Latin "Magnificat," undoubtedly in Handel's autograph, which contains nine movements closely resembling parts of "Israel in Egypt"; in some cases the resemblance amounts to substantial identity. For many years nobody questioned that this "Magnifica" was a genuine discarded composition of Handel's, from which, according to his custom, he drew materials for his oratorio. But in 1857 there was discovered in the library of the Sacred Harmonic Society a very incorrect MS. copy of the same work, headed "Magnificat dei Rd. Sigr. Erba." Mr. Rockstro makes the point that this inscription only means that the volume once belonged to a priest named Erba: "Had the 'Magnificat' been composed by Sigr. Erba the word used would have been *del*, not *de*." This objection, however, is not well taken. Both prepositions are used indifferently in Italian to express authorship, just as the corresponding "of" and "by" are used in English. The inscription may mean what Mr. Rockstro says it does, but it does not necessarily mean that. The real objections to Erba's claims are that no one knows the history of the Sacred Harmonic Society's MS., or its source; it is evidently not an original but a bad copy, or the authority upon which the writer of the inscription ascribed it to Erba, supposing that *del* in this case is meant to indicate authorship, and not merely ownership; and that the obscure and long-forgotten Erba wrote nothing else which mankind have thought worth preserving. The disputed passages of "Israel" are in the second part, occurring almost consecutively, and including some of the most dignified and effective numbers in the oratorio. If Erba wrote them, he must have been a man of genius and his style must have been greatly in advance of that of his time. But we can hardly be asked to believe that an unknown composer was really a man of such extraordinary powers, unless we have some positive evidence to that effect. Mr. Rockstro presents this side of the controversy with earnestness; but he gives us no hint of the arguments on the other side, and he overlooks the significant fact that the learned and enthusiastic Chrysander, after a laborious examination of the whole matter, decides against Handel. Still more unsatisfactory is Mr. Rockstro's treatment of the supposed plagiarisms from another forgotten Italian, Francesco Antonio Uri, in the "Dettingen Te Deum." It is simply impossible to gather from his book any intelligible account of the case for Uri, and we are therefore unable to estimate the cogency of his arguments for Handel. He opens his defense with a mistake, just as he did in the case of Erba. Remarking that the Uri "Te Deum" begins with the sentence "Laudamus te," which does not belong to the hymn, he says: "Félix tells us that Dom. F. A. Uri was a priest. Would any Italian ecclesiastic have ventured to tamper with the text of the Ambrosian Hymn?" To this curious passage we answer that the sentence which Mr. Rockstro declares does not form any part of the Ambrosian Hymn is included in the first phrase of it, "Te Deum laudamus"; that we do not believe that any Italian composer, ecclesiastic or secular, would hesitate to take

slight liberties with the text of a hymn for musical reasons; and that Félix does not call Uri a priest, and does not give him the clerical title of Dom. He describes the composer as "maître de chapelle de l'église des Frères de la doctrine chrétienne à Venise." The Brothers of the Christian Doctrine are not priests, and if they were it does not follow that the choir-master in their church must be a priest too. We concur heartily in Mr. Rockstro's opinion that "no critic who blindly espouses one side of a disputed question is worth listening to for a moment."

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